

# Organizing Your Walk-In Coolers

## Wisconsin Food Code Fact Sheet #20

Organizing your walk-in cooler can maintain food safety, cut food costs, save labor, and most of all, reduce the risk of foodborne illness.

### Separate

If possible, designate separate sections of walk-in cooler for raw and ready-to-eat products. This will minimize the chances of cross-contamination. For example, designate one rack of shelves for raw products and one rack for ready-to-eat products.

Another option if space is limited is to put all raw foods on the bottom shelves and all ready-to-eat foods on the top shelves. Also, separate foods by cooking temperatures. Fish, whole-muscle beef and pork on top, ground beef and pork next and all poultry products on the bottom shelves.



### Don't Overload

Do not put more food in a cooler than it is designed to hold. This will decrease its ability to keep foods at proper temperatures by taxing its cooling units and decreasing cold air circulation around the products.

Hint: Allow 1 – 1.5 cubic feet of walk-in space for every meal a day.

### Thermometers

Keep at least one accurate thermometer in the warmest part of the walk-in cooler to measure the air temperature. It is better to have several placed throughout the unit. For example, have one by the door, in the middle and near the back. Thermometers should be checked everyday to make sure the air is cold enough to keep the internal temperature of the food below 41°F. Internal temperatures of the food should also be taken to ensure the cooler is working properly.

### Arrangement of Food

One way to arrange food when concerned about temperatures is to put potentially hazardous foods like meats, fish, poultry and dairy products in the back of the cooler and produce closer to the front; or store potentially hazardous foods on shelves below the raw food.

### Arrangement of Shelves

Keep shelves at least six inches off the floor for ease of cleaning. Keep the shelves low enough to prevent the food from touching the ceiling. Arrange items in such a manner that good cold-air circulation is maintained around all food. Shelves should not be lined; lining the shelves will block the circulation needed for proper cooling of foods.

### Protection of Food

Food should always be covered to protect it from contamination from the environment. If cooling foods, the food may be left uncovered until proper temperatures are reached; but then the food must be adequately covered.

### Labeling of Food

Label all food to avoid confusion and continually rotate all products. Labeling of the shelves can contribute to quicker and safer storage and removal of food items. Labels should include type of food, date it was put in the cooler, and the date by which it must be used. Remember once a potentially hazardous ready-to-eat food is made or once its intact package is opened, it must be used in 7 days.

Hint: Remember FIFO, first in, first out. Rotate stock so that the food bought first is used first.